

Demystifying the ACFRE Process

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Every year at the AFP international conference, one or more fundraising professionals are recognized for becoming the latest to attain the coveted ACFRE designation, an achievement held by fewer than 100 people worldwide. Many in the audience may be wondering, “AC ... what?” Or, “What’s the difference between this and the CFRE?” A few who may be involved in the process themselves may think, “Oh wow! It *is* achievable!” And those seated in the front of the audience, the rest of the ACFREs, wearing their medallions proudly, are cheering on a colleague who is now among their ranks.



To the general public it is even more confusing. They ask, “What is an ACK-FREE?” Like the charity that Linda stopped contributing to when it began addressing her as “Ms. Lysakowskacfre,” most people are clueless about what the initials mean.

So what is the ACFRE and is it worth all the trouble to gain the designation? The Advanced Certified Fund Raising Executive designation is awarded to those who have submitted an approved application listing their accomplishments over at least 10 years in the profession, passed a rigorous written exam, prepared an extensive portfolio and, finally, engaged in an even more rigorous oral review process. In many respects, the process echoes the stages of obtaining a Ph.D., with the portfolio taking the place of the dissertation and professional and life experience taking the place of years of academic study. Sometimes to help a lay person understand, you can use an analogy from the accounting profession: A CFRE is like a CPA, in that it is a certification based on current professional practice, while the ACFRE is like a Ph.D. in accountancy, determined by a person’s overall body of knowledge in the field.

Is it worth it? The answer is a resounding “yes!” For some, it opens the doors to a promotion and a higher paying position. For others, it means the respect of their peers. However, at the core it is truly a sense of individual accomplishment that drives most people to attain the

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ACFRE. In fact, you really must have a desire to achieve this for your own personal satisfaction. The process is rigorous, and if you do not have the passion for the end result, you will likely find reasons to put the application aside.


For many the challenges of going through the ACFRE process include the costs, the time and the rigorous testing procedures. To be honest, it's tough. You likely will have to re-do at least one section of the process. Alice openly confesses to trying three times to pass the written exam. Linda admits that the orals were the most terrifying part for her, and it took her two times to complete.

At the same time, in many respects the process is actually a benefit. As you proceed through the ACFRE steps, you have an opportunity to step back from the day-to-day grind, walk away from what's on fire today and really assess the progress you have made as a fundraising professional. In addition, should you choose to let people know that you are pursuing the credential, you gain a "cheering squad" who will try to keep you motivated, not just about your future ACFRE, but also about your fundraising practice in general. Plus, once you get that medal—and the ACFRE is a lifetime designation—the camaraderie among the ACFRE group is a valued asset.

Here are our tips for pursuing the ACFRE:

- Start building your portfolio well before the portfolio stage. If you have a case statement, development plan, fundraising materials, etc., that you are really proud of, pull the samples now so you don't have to hunt them down later.
- Read as much of the reading list as you can, especially in the areas where you think you might not be as strong as you could be.
- Keep track of all the courses you've attended and taught. Pay particular attention to the ACFRE-approved sessions at conferences, particularly in ethics.
- If you're panicked about taking a test, consider a test-taking refresher course at a college- or university-level tutoring center.
- The best advice? Build your support network. Find a current ACFRE to be your mentor to help you through the process, and tell at least one person that you are doing this. As much as people sometimes want to keep things quiet for fear of failure, it's better to have others to comfort you through the difficult parts, urge you on when you want to give up and celebrate your victory when you finish the process.

Congratulations for considering the ACFRE—now go get it!

For more information on the ACFRE, visit the AFP website, www.afpnet.org, and click on "professional advancement" and "certification." 

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